

Two Neighborhoods Join Forces to Increase Healthy Options in Kent County, MI

Steve Kelso

At A Glance

In 2015, two Kent County neighborhoods joined forces to make fresh fruits and vegetables available at two convenience stores for the nearly 5,000 residents of Roosevelt Park and Black Hills. These low-income, urban Grand Rapids, Michigan neighborhoods are home to mostly Hispanic and African American residents and recent Asian and African immigrants. Thanks to the partnership, these communities are more aware of eating healthy, and store owners benefit with increased sales and traffic.



Public Health Challenge

Obesity among school-aged children is a major public health concern in Kent County. In a 2014 Kent County Health Department survey, obesity in Hispanic (17%), African American (13%), and Native American (7%) students was higher than in other students. Obesity and a lack of exercise are risk factors for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. Simple changes in diet and

physical activity can reduce these risks. However, neither the Roosevelt Park nor Black Hills neighborhoods have good access to healthy foods or opportunities for physical activity. To bring healthier foods into the area, the partners worked with store owners who were concerned about their profits and customers who were concerned about store cleanliness.

Find Out More

Neighbors can help by getting involved with one of the many programs. The goal of increasing overall health in the area cannot be achieved without the involvement of the entire community. Shopping at the convenience stores that now sell healthier offerings reinforces the involvement of the entire community. For more information, visit <http://www.accesskent.com>. This project is supported by CDC's Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) cooperative agreement.

Getting people to change their eating and exercise habits is one of the most difficult things to do. To see people making healthier choices at the corner stores is incredibly rewarding and shows the good work that we can do when we work together.

- Eugene Sueing, Community Health Director, YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids

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Approach

The Roosevelt Park and Black Hills neighborhoods joined forces as part of the Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) program of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Team members worked with two convenience stores in each town to position coolers in highly visible areas of the stores, display healthy items attractively, and improve store cleanliness. With support from the Veggie Van mobile market program of the YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids, the stores started stocking a variety of produce, from plantains, bananas, and avocados to locally sourced potatoes, onions, and tomatoes. Trained nutrition educators from the YMCA provided food demonstrations.

Results

Store changes in 2015 have given nearly 5,000 residents of Roosevelt Park and Black Hills increased access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Now healthier foods are not only available, but sales are described as "brisk" and continue to grow. Neighbors are sharing recipes using fruits and vegetables to create healthy, savory, and economical meals for their families. Sales and traffic at the convenience stores have also increased, prompting one store owner to spruce up the storefront. A third corner store expressed interest in joining the project after receiving requests from customers.

What's Next

The local REACH program has launched an educational billboard campaign to keep healthy messages in the minds of residents. The educational campaign is in Spanish and will change messages six times in the next year. Now that access to healthy foods has been tackled, team members are focusing on improving physical activity by working with faith-based community leaders to better use a forgotten and poorly maintained two-mile stretch known as The Oxford Trail. Maps of the Oxford Trail and other routes will continue to be placed in local shops. A number of community events, such as Family Fiesta, are planned to draw the communities further together and help them find common healthy goals.